

Governor Rod R. Blagojevich
Director Charles D. Johnson

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Flu Shot Urged for Seniors

It's flu shot time again.

"Flu shots are part of the routine as we change seasons," says Charles D. Johnson, director of the Illinois Department on Aging.

"Flu shots are safe, dependable and covered by Medicare Part B," says Mr. Johnson, "so I cannot think of a single reason to skip getting a shot around the end of October.

"As we check on our furnaces and get out the overcoats, we should also schedule a flu shot as part of our transition into the late fall season."

Shots are particularly important for older people, Mr. Johnson says, because vulnerability to the flu virus increases with age, and older people are more likely to experience serious complications if they contract the flu.

A flu shot is recommended for all older people, except those who are allergic to eggs. People who are ill should postpone the shot until health is recovered.

Influenza, commonly called "the flu" is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Infection with influenza viruses can result in illness ranging from mild to severe and life-threatening complications. It is a particular threat to people 65 and older who are more likely to have less efficient immune systems.

Medicare has covered the flu shot since 1993. Vaccination against pneumonia, recommended once or twice during a lifetime, has been covered since 1981.

The single best way to avoid the flu is to get a vaccination every year in late October, according to the federal Center for Disease Control. An annual shot is necessary, the CDC reports, because the virus is continually changing: the flu that threatens this year is not the same virus that attacked during the 2003-2004 flu season, which usually extends from early December through February.

The CDC estimated that 10 to 20 percent of U.S. residents get the flu each year: an average of 114,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications and 36,000 Americans die each year from complications of flu.

Symptoms of flu include fever (usually high), headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches, the CDC reports. The main way that influenza viruses are spread is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes, called "droplet spread." This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled (generally up to 3 feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. Though much less frequent, the viruses also can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands. Scientific studies show that adults can shed virus from one day, before developing symptoms, to up to seven days after getting sick, the CDC reports.

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes.

The following steps may help prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses like flu:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
- Wash your hands often to protect from germs. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

For more information, contact:

Nikki Smith

1-217-785-3371

1-312-814-2927

nikki.smith@aging.state.il.us